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Love and Hate:

Exploring the Relationship between College and Community

Shannon L. Carr

The relationship between college and community, otherwise known as a town-gown relationship, can be met with mixed emotions. Colleges tend to be large employers and major economic contributors to the communities in which they are located. Yet, college students are met with resistance from community residents due to their sometimes disruptive behaviors. Factors such as traffic congestion, distribution of public safety resources, and economic concerns are all part of the ever-changing town-gown relationship. Through the exploration of this topic, the emerging conclusion is the need for university and community to find common ground through communication.

Imagine: On a cold, snowy, November night, 15 students mingle on the wrap-around porch of a late 19th century home. The snow dampens the peaceful night noises, but the students' raucous laughter and loud chatter penetrate the bedroom window of your well kept home next door. To your dismay, the disrespectful and noisy neighbors keep up their behavior for several hours. After covering your head to escape the racket, you finally decide to confront the students whom you know attend the local university.

In a bulky housecoat and worn slippers, you make your way next door. Through a cloud of smoke, you address your neighbors and explain that you are trying to sleep and would appreciate their cooperation in quieting down as it is now early in the morning hours. You are met with a tentative response, yet assured that the noise will subside. Alas, the commotion does not decrease, but rather increases. In frustration and desperation, you hesitantly turn to your last resort, telephoning the local police. Within minutes, you hear local police officers confront the rowdy students. Finally, you can enjoy the silence.

After a fitful night of sleep, you arise late in the morning. As you step onto your porch, you gasp as you notice the litter, which is scattered throughout your backyard. While you hate to assume, you know that this can only be the handiwork of the students who so blatantly disrupted your sleep. Not only did they vandalize the still of the night, but they also vandalized your property. You must now determine your course of action and how you will maintain a neighborly relationship with these students.

To complicate matters, you are employed by the same university where these students are enrolled. In fact, your work is in the student affairs profession. Not only are you a member of the campus community, but a member of the community in which the university makes its residence. How does this incident affect your relationship with the students you encounter in your professional role? How do you as a campus administrator deal with the issues that arise in the relationship between university and community?

While this scenario is a creation of my imagination, it is a realistic example of the possible interactions between town residents and local college students. This example is based on my observations of the relationships between universities and the towns in which they are located, termed town-gown communities. In most communities across the nation, the town-gown relationship is in constant flux, quickly moving from positive and supportive to negative and tumultuous.

This article explores issues common to the town-gown relationship using examples from The University of Vermont (UVM), Vanderbilt University, Syracuse University, and their respective communities. It also ascertains the factors involved in the town-gown relationship and the appropriate responses for enhancing a positive working relationship between college and community. In this way, the reasons why colleges and their respective communities experience such a love-hate relationship are illuminated.

Many factors impact the town-gown community greatly. One of the primary issues facing town-gown communities is the ability for students, higher education professionals, and community members to establish healthy neighborly relationships. These relationships are not always positive, and as a result tend to be met with resistance. Many students neglect their responsibilities as members of a community outside the university campus confines and behave inappropriately. Peter Clavelle (2001), Mayor of Burlington, Vermont states,

While UVM-city relations have been at times contentious, we've made progress in the recent past. Last year, UVM, under President Judith Ramaley, reached an agreement with the city that addresses the three most difficult challenges facing town-gown relations: on-campus housing, off-campus student behavior, and UVM's land-use policies. (p. 19)

The lack of sufficient on-campus housing and demands on community resources by students living off-campus has often increased the chasm that separates students and permanent residents of a town-gown community. To fully address the neighborly connection, student affairs professionals must first have a clear picture of the assumptions surrounding the social-environmental aspect of living within a town-gown community. Researcher David Nichols (1990) plainly outlines some of these assumptions.

1. There is a striking difference in nearby neighborhoods when the university is in session and when the students are all gone home for the holidays . . . 4. Students' social activities will frequently create loud noise. 5. Most students drive at least one automobile, consequently resulting in parking and traffic problems on city streets . . . 7. The students who live in a particular apartment one year may not be there the next, but will be replaced by other students unfamiliar with any previous agreements or regulations . . . 9. Off-campus dwellings occupied by college students, particularly older houses, are often allowed to deteriorate by proprietors . . . 12. The academic level, political views, and socioeconomic status of university faculty and administrators usually conflicts with that of many community residents. (p. 90-91)

The assumptions that Nichols (1990) articulates are common to most communities where universities are located regardless of whether towns are urban or rural. He indicates that life in a town-gown community varies depending on the academic calendar. Frequently, students who stay in the university environment over a major holiday or an academic break will vocalize their boredom and disdain for the quiet that results from the absence of classmates and peers. While a social hardship for students, this is a time of rest and relaxation for many town residents. These residents now find their neighborhoods a place of quiet and calm.

Nichols (1990) asserts that where there are students there will also be noise. In many collegiate populations there exists a party subculture, which includes binge drinking and rowdy gatherings. Since most universities have strict alcohol policies, which discourage underage students from drinking in the residence halls, drinking occurs at off-campus locations. At these off-campus locations, scenarios resembling the one described in the introduction transpire.

Mayor Clavelle (2001) is proud of a policy change, which has been a major deterrent against excessive noise, underage drinking, and other disturbances that are tearing at the relationships between students and Burlington residents. In response to violations of the law, UVM will take appropriate disciplinary action and will report to the city its judicial response to these violations. While many universities are responsive to the concerns regarding noise and drinking expressed by their respective towns, many others are not. These latter universities adopt a much more laissez-faire approach, believing that permanent residents of town-gown communities must simply accept many inappropriate student behaviors.

When asked about the noise difficulties created by students in residential neighborhoods, one university community mayor expressed it this way: "Some communities run trains through town. In a college community, we run students through" (Nichols, 1990, p. 91). While residents should not be expected to endure unreasonable inconveniences and universities cannot be held accountable for all student-related problems, there are those occasional university-related effects that must be accepted as part of the territory (Nichols, p. 91).

In addition to the disrespectful behavior of off-campus students, student renters drive many neighborhood homes into a state of decline. In Burlington, Vermont, the “rental housing vacancy rate . . . is less than one quarter of one percent” (Clavelle, 2001, p. 19). Furthermore, this shortage allows landlords to increase rental prices while allowing their rental properties to deteriorate. This is a frustrating reality for low-income college students who have trouble finding suitable accommodations within their budget. This reality is even more exasperating for the community members who watch the homes in their locality slip into silent decay. With the possible exception of landlords, few people benefit from this practice. Frustration rises in dissatisfied students and community residents, thus agitating the town-gown relationship further.

Beyond the above stated issues, town-gown communities face the huge task of providing public safety resources to both town citizens and university students. Public safety is a concern of both college and community members. 弁y and large, most colleges and universities provide their own police or security services but rely on local governments for fire protection and emergency medical services” (Nichols, 1990, p. 74). This common utilization of resources creates a great need for a strong town-gown relationship.

As discussed, the student party culture creates additional work for police and fire departments, as they must respond to neighborhood disputes and/or alcohol related injuries. Thus, universities need to be in constant communication with police and fire officials. Joe Young, Mayor of Guelph, Canada, home of Guelph University says, “The University makes heavy demands on the fire-protection and police services and we need to examine the relationship between our people and the people at the university who perform similar duties” (Webster, 2001, p. 1).

In addition to fire-protection and police services, most students own at least one vehicle, so parking and traffic violations are natural concerns for town-gown communities. This problem is all too frequent; lack of parking creates major tension between residents, students, and university officials. These additional vehicles also add to the deterioration of city streets and strain local police and transportation departments (Nichols, 1990).

While all of these issues are very important concerns in considering town-gown relationships, the predominant issue of the town-gown relationship is economic in nature.

Vanderbilt University to include its Medical Center is the largest private employer in the city (Nashville, Tennessee) of over a half million people. The University and Medical Center have more than 9,400 full- and part-time employees. Payroll is \$225 million and total expenditures are \$475 million annually. (Nichols, 1990, p. 43)

In many communities, universities are the largest employers. They “spur economic development by directing university contracts and purchases to local businesses” (Rodin, 2001, p. 29). With such a large employee base and high spending, the university gains an economic stronghold over the community.

University students are also a major catalyst in the economic development of a town-gown community. Many communities are thankful for local student spending, “students often drive the economy . . . local officials can take advantage of their spending with higher sales taxes that may shift the burden from local residents to students and the poor” (Beard, 2001, 14). Often times, students are oblivious to the ways in which they may be economically exploited. Universities must build relationships with local business leaders and city officials to protect students’ rights and develop relationships where everyone can benefit equally from the economic boom that local higher education creates.

The realization of the university stronghold on a town-gown community has caused many communities to examine the relationship they share with their local universities. “We should entirely shift our focus from our traditional approach of pondering what we could do to the community or even for the community, to a mindset of candidly discussing what we could do with the community” (Rodin, 2001, p. 29). As a result, communication and the fostering of key relationships between university and community have gained even greater importance.

In the mid-eighties a huge debate raged between the city of Syracuse, New York, and Syracuse University over the management of a 50,000-seat stadium known as the Carrier Dome. Owned by Syracuse University, the Carrier Dome was an untaxed facility as long as the city received a portion of the proceeds from all non-academic Dome events. In this agreement, Syracuse University was to pay all costs associated with the management of the facility and Dome events, including all traffic control costs. Due to the high levels of traffic at Dome events, the city of Syracuse provided an exorbitant amount of traffic services to all Dome events. When Syracuse University failed to cover the traffic control costs, a lawsuit from the city was filed. In the end, the judge ruled that the Carrier Dome was exempt from property taxes but Syracuse University was forced to reimburse the city for traffic fees and an annual fee was assessed by the city for management of all events. After a long, difficult battle, Syracuse University and the city of Syracuse stood on shaky ground in terms of their town-gown relationship (Kirby, 1988). Melvin Eggers, Syracuse University Chancellor stated, "a crucial lesson of the Carrier Dome tax debate is the importance of maintaining close, working relationships with City Hall" (Kirby, 1988, p. 49).

Clearly the need for communication between college and community is critical. Many factors come into play for citizens, students, local government officials and university administrators, and a healthy rapport must subsist in order for both to co-exist peacefully and effectively. How does a university administrator deal with the issues that arise from town-gown relationships?

Much research has been conducted on ways to improve town-gown relations. At the University of Vermont, a Good Neighbor Program has been established. The Good Neighbor Program is administered jointly by UVM's Office of Government Relations and by the Off-Campus Student Organization and has made strides in enhancing communication among students and their neighbors. Each autumn, program volunteers distribute booklets detailing rights and responsibilities of students living off campus. (Clavelle, 2001, p. 19)

This is just one of many concrete ways in which universities are making efforts to improve their relationship with the community.

In a 2001 study, Teresa Beard offers ways for university administrators to strengthen town-gown relations in their community.

Ask how you can assist your school's community relations staff or become an ambassador for the college during local functions Know what the school offers area citizens. Study the economic impact, the number of student volunteers placed each year, and the cultural activities and facilities that are open to locals Urge students to sign up to vote locally, so their voice impacts city and county elections. Sponsor registration drives, and circulate literature or host a forum for students to learn about how local issues affect them. (Beard, 2001, 13)

These suggestions are relatively simple, cost effective ways to make changes in the relationship with the community. In addition, Beard's suggestions empower students, as well as community members, to be the vehicle for changing the face of town-gown relationships. In much the same way, David Nichols (1990) offers his advice for improving the relationship.

Appoint a university ombudsman to receive citizen complaints and mediate resolution of issues. Such an official should attend city council meetings in which town-gown issues might be raised. This official would communicate issues and problems to appropriate university officials . . . Ensure the establishment of joint written procedures to deal with student-related issues, i.e., noise, student misconduct, traffic, off-campus parking, housing, zoning, etc. There should be a formal linkage between the university and the community in order to effectively handle re-occurring town-gown problems Educate students about their responsibility to be good neighbors. The university can include tips for social activities and conduct off campus in freshman orientation sessions, brochures, the student newspaper, and meetings with student groups. Local ordinances, laws, and regulations should be included in such information. (p. 105)

While Nichols's ideas are much more explicit, they allow for a forum by which students and community members can interact and create a healthy town-gown relationship. The university must, to achieve a solid

town-gown relationship, invest time, money, and energy into the betterment of their relationship with the community. The university must engage students, local residents, and community leaders in open, continual dialogue to address concerns on all sides. Once universities and communities conquer their communication problems, Rodin's (2001) so-called multiplier effect will arise; "Every good step seems to produce two more" (p. 30).

In order for town-gown communities to experience the multiplier effect, they must take crucial steps toward the improvement of their relationships. Students must understand the following: "You are young . . . One of your most obvious misunderstandings is the assumption that when communication fails - whether it is between author and reader or lecturer and audience--it is surely not your fault. This is a most questionable assumption" (Barr, 1963, p. 308). This is an extremely powerful statement that speaks to the need for students to realize the need for effective communication, which in many cases includes effective listening.

Members of the town community must remember that nothing can be more useful than for the public and the teaching profession to understand their respective functions. The teacher needs to understand public opinion and the social order, as much as the public needs to comprehend the nature of expert educational service. (Dewey, 1909, p. x)

It is critical that the community is knowledgeable about university operations. Likewise, the university must take an active role in community relations and must be knowledgeable about local government and community concerns.

With advice given to students and the community, the university administrators need to bear in mind, "that the word administer means being the servant of somebody else . . . A really good administrator is the servant of the faculty, his colleagues; and they are the servants of the students who are in turn the servants of the republic of letters". (Barr, 1963, p. 308)

I would add that the university's focus should be heavily centered on the surrounding community. Without a healthy comprehension of student and community concerns, town-gown relationships will never prosper.

To conclude, much research has been done to indicate how important a healthy town-gown relationship is to the overall well-being of both university and community. While this article has focused on three specific universities, the issues presented are common to town-gown communities nationwide. Further inquiry is necessary to aid in the creation of communities where town-gown issues are well managed and strong relationships exist. Case studies on such relationships would help universities and communities struggling with town-gown issues to understand the options available for bolstering their situations. A quote by Judith Rodin (2001) best sums up the town-gown debate, "by forming strategic partnerships with their neighbors and making significant and sustained investments in the community's future, universities will truly be investing in their own" (p. 35). In many cases, town-gown relationships are filled with love, hate, winners, and losers. Based on the research, however, town-gown relationships can and should be equally beneficial to both college and community.

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